

# HAWTHORNE MEADOW

(235 East Pleasant Street)

## RECOMMENDATIONS



Leisure Services and Supplemental Education Commission  
Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee

January 2012

## Contents

Executive Summary .....	1
Committee Members.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Community Preservation Act Proposal—LSSE Commission .....	4
Town Meeting Discussion &Vote .....	6
Public Process—Program of Uses & Conceptual Design.....	7
Affordable Housing .....	7
Historical Preservation.....	7
Recreation .....	8
Vision.....	9
Master Plan .....	10
Open Space and Recreation Plan .....	10
Recommendations.....	11
Conceptual Plan .....	11
Affordable Housing .....	12
Recreation .....	13
Site and Field Design .....	15
Passive/Informal Recreation .....	15
Access .....	15
Need/Demand .....	16
Amherst’s Recreation Lands - Current Status .....	17
Open Space .....	18
Community Gardens .....	18
Walking Trails .....	18
Seating and Tables .....	19
Neighborhood Protections .....	19
Next Steps .....	19
Affordable Housing Feasibility Study .....	19
Wetlands Delineation and Assessment .....	19
Schematic Plans of Recreation Property.....	19



## Executive Summary

As with many Town projects involving the acquisition of private property, the Hawthorne Meadow project is the result of years of patient planning and effort. Hawthorne Meadow is approximately 7 acres of open, undeveloped property close to the downtown and the complex of schools and playing fields associated with Wildwood Elementary, the Regional Middle School, and the Amherst Community Childcare Center. Few undeveloped properties with those locational qualities exist and, as a result, the Hawthorne property was carefully watched by private (residential) developers and Town officials for years. In considering acquisition of the property and the range of potential public uses, Town officials were guided by its location and community needs as expressed in the Open Space & Recreation Plan and Amherst's recently adopted Master Plan.

On May 12, 2010, Amherst's Town Meeting approved the purchase of the Hawthorne Meadow property located at 235 East Pleasant Street. The purchase was a culmination of months of work and research by the Leisure Services and Supplemental Education (LSSE) Commission, Housing Partnership/Fair Housing (HP/FH) Committee, LSSE staff and Planning Department staff, who determined that it was feasible to use the property for recreational purposes and affordable housing—activities eligible for Community Preservation Act funding. The results of that Town Meeting action read:

*"VOTED by a declared two-thirds to appropriate a sum of \$500,000 from CPA Funds for the purposes of Open Space, Recreation, and/or Community Housing for the purchase of the Hawthorne property (Map 11B, Parcel 54), and, to meet this appropriation, authorize the Town Treasurer, with the approval of the Select Board, to borrow \$500,000 pursuant to Chapter 44B, Section 11 of the General Laws or any other enabling authority, and issue bonds or notes of the Town therefore, including any and all costs incidental thereto; to authorize the Select Board, the Town Manager and/or other boards or officers to apply for and receive grants and/or other funds and to execute any and all instruments and agreements to effectuate said purchase; and, further, to authorize the Select Board to acquire said property by gift, purchase, or eminent domain and to accept and/or convey restrictions on said property, all in accordance with Chapter 44B and Chapter 184 of the General Laws."*

Following Town Meeting authorization, the Hawthorne Meadow property was acquired on August 6, 2010. After purchasing the property Town Manager John Musante requested that the LSSE Commission and the HP/FH Committee jointly hold public meetings to receive input from citizens regarding potential uses of the property as defined by the Town Meeting vote, and then report back to him with more specific recommendations concerning the program of uses and a conceptual design.

This public input process began in November 2010 with a site visit to the Hawthorne Meadow property allowing citizens to tour the land and house. In December 2010, the LSSE Commission and the HP/FH Committee invited local residents to attend a jointly held public meeting in the Bangs Community Center to hear their comments, suggestions, and questions. This meeting was

also an opportunity for the public to hear reports from Town staff on evaluation of the property. A second jointly held public meeting took place in March, 2011, at which residents were provided an informational packet that included answers to previously asked questions, statistics indicating the use and demand of playing fields, and contextual maps. Select Board member Alisa Brewer moderated the meeting and encouraged residents to provide feedback on a conceptual plan that was developed in response to earlier public comments and by the LSSE Commission. Throughout the public input process, the LSSE Commission and the HP/FH Committee held their regularly scheduled monthly meetings and included time on their agendas for public discussion regarding the Hawthorne Meadow property.

This report represents the conclusion of the public process and includes recommendations to the Town Manager regarding the program of preferred uses for the property as well as a conceptual plan for development of the site in accordance with those uses. A summary of the recommendations is as follows:

***Recreation*** ~ The Town should develop a multi-purpose playing field for daytime use that can accommodate a range of activities for all age groups.

***Affordable Housing*** ~ The site is appropriate for a two-family residence with a preference for historically appropriate rehabilitation and renovation of the existing farmhouse. If that is not financially feasible, the historically important elements of the farmhouse should be reused on-site or elsewhere.

***Open Space*** ~ The existing wetlands should be allowed to succeed naturally, maturing into a wet woodland environment and wildlife corridor that can serve as a buffer between the residential neighborhood to the west and the recreation area. Walking trails, community gardens, and secondary spaces for passive recreation should be integral to the design for the property.

Under the Amherst Town Government Act, responsibility for town-owned property is given to the Town Manager. With guidance from these recommendations, the Town Manager will decide the final uses for the Hawthorne Meadow property.

## Committee Members

### *Leisure Services and Supplemental Education Commission*

Stanley Ziomek, Chair  
Peter Blier, Vice Chair  
Alan Bonneau  
James Patulak  
Maryanna Whittemore  
Anna-Beth Winnograd

### *Housing Partnership/ Fair Housing Committee*

Nancy Gregg, Chair  
Christopher Hoffman  
Ellen Kosmer  
Florence Stern  
Claude Tellier  
Walter Wolnik

## Introduction

In 1974, the Town of Amherst purchased 13 acres of property off Potwine Lane. That was the last property acquired for recreational playing fields by the Town almost 40 years. The local elementary and regional middle and high schools have their own playing fields, which are currently overused and shared by many activities; there is not enough space to accommodate the range of activities and sports played here in Amherst. As properties adjacent to the schools were developed, the Town realized its ability to expand the inventory of playing fields was limited. The Hawthorne Farm, located at 235 East Pleasant Street, however, remained an undeveloped parcel of approximately seven acres.

For many years, this small farm grew vegetables and produce, and even pastured livestock. The neighborhood became accustomed to the farm stand at the end of the driveway, which sold an assortment of items including vegetables, fruit and flower arrangements; although during the latter years of operation the produce was grown off-site in neighboring communities. More recently, the property was for some years not actively used for agriculture or crop production, and the farm stand no longer operated along the street. Because farm use of the property ceased for years, the property's agricultural exemption from wetland regulations was lost. Thereafter, the wetlands that constituted about 1/3 of the property, and divided it down the middle, acquired protection under state and local regulation and could no longer be farmed.

The Town became more interested in the property because of its location adjacent to Wildwood Elementary School and the Regional Middle School, and its general proximity to the Town Center. Private developers were also interested in the property because of the potential to create a subdivision of expensive single-family homes, not unlike Morrow Drive immediately to the south.

Understanding that the community's need for active recreation space was critical and growing, the Town of Amherst worked with the owners to purchase the property, with the understanding that it remains undeveloped open space and used for recreation. The Leisure Services and Supplemental Education (LSSE) Department took the lead in the acquisition, as the property appeared to provide many benefits for increasing recreation activities in Town.

## Community Preservation Act Proposal—LSSE Commission

The single most important goal of the Town of Amherst Leisure Services and Supplemental Education (LSSE) Commission is to plan for and ensure that current and future generations have sufficient parks and recreation resources. Funds from the Community Preservation Act (CPA) can be used by the Town to achieve this goal, and are also frequently used to increase conservation land, complete historic preservation projects, and expand affordable housing options in the community.

As LSSE was forming its CPA proposal in [date], LSSE and Planning Department staff undertook preliminary assessments and developed conceptual plans to determine whether

there would be sufficient space for multi-purpose playing fields, given that wetlands cover almost a third of the property and divide it right down the middle. LSSE envisioned an area for active recreation that would serve the schools, youth and adult sports, and family activities, and would be open to the general public as a community-wide amenity. The property's proximity to the schools was a real advantage because it meant that many kids and families could walk to the site, and there was no need for additional parking, typically an expensive component when developing a recreational facility. Furthermore, the acquisition of the property for recreation purposes would satisfy a number of goals and objectives of Amherst's recently adopted Master Plan and the 2009 Open Space and Recreation Plan.

By the time the LSSE Commission had finalized its CPA proposal with a unanimous vote to acquire the property in December 2009, the owners no longer lived on the farm: Mr. George R. Hawthorne had passed away, his wife was living offsite, and the care and control of the land was managed by their son George Hawthorne Jr. Discussions regarding the Town purchasing the property continued until a mutually agreeable price of \$500,000 was reached. At the same time, LSSE had discussed this project with the schools to secure their preliminary support even though they were not contributing financially to the acquisition.

The LSSE Commission's CPA proposal was presented and discussed during numerous public meetings of the CPA Committee. The LSSE Commission noted that in addition to the multi-purpose playing field, there was a possibility that community gardens could be located on the property. It was also determined that the farmhouse and barns would be more appropriate as affordable housing rather than an auxiliary recreational use. Although the asking price of \$500,000 was much more than the original funding request of the LSSE Commission, the CPA Committee suggested that the Town bond the price over ten years to acquire the entire property to make the project feasible. The LSSE Commission's original proposal included a funding request of \$150,000 with the expectation that grants and other sources would cover the difference. In response to questions from the CPAC, the original LSSE proposal was substantially revised.

**On [date],** the CPA Committee voted 6-0-2 in support of recommending this project to Town Meeting, stating in their FY2011 Report to Town Meeting that:

*"The CPAC believes that the acquisition of this 6+ acre former farm property is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to expand and enhance needed public facilities, whether for open space and recreation or community housing (potential reuse of the existing house on the property). The Hawthorne property is adjacent to the Amherst Community Child Care Center, Wildwood Elementary School, the Regional Middle School, and associated recreation fields. The property is located in a central downtown Amherst neighborhood, within walking distance of thousands of residents. Existing parking for the schools could serve any future uses on this property. The CPAC is recommending the bonding of funding for this important acquisition."*



## Town Meeting Discussion & Vote

On May 12, 2010, Amherst's Annual Town Meeting approved the purchase of the Hawthorne Property located at 235 East Pleasant Street with an almost unanimous vote—a rather unprecedented action by Town Meeting. The purchase was a culmination of months of work and research by the LSSE Commission, HP/FH Committee, and Town staff from the LSSE and Planning Departments, which determined that it was feasible to use the property for recreational purposes and affordable housing—activities eligible for Community Preservation Act funding. The Finance Committee voted 7-0 to recommend the bonding as an appropriate use of CPA funds. The Select Board also voted unanimously to recommend this article.

The discussion on the floor of Town Meeting regarding the acquisition was short and to the point: expand recreation fields. LSSE Commission members and Town Meeting members explained that the purpose of the acquisition was to expand recreation fields, citing the overuse of existing fields by the many sports played in Amherst and noting that the Town has not acquired property for playing fields in almost 40 years. It was mentioned that a study committee, formed in the fall, would work with citizens and the schools to help determine the best programs for the property, and that grant funds were a likely source to help with construction. The term “community housing” was clarified with an explanation that any housing funded by CPA must be affordable, defined as housing for those earning 80 percent or less than the Area Median Income. It was noted that the Open Space component of the article was defined by the extensive wetlands on the site, which are not buildable for housing or recreation. The discussion concluded with a statement that the Town would try its best to honor the wishes of Mr. Hawthorne Sr. and name the property Hawthorne Meadow.

Results of the Town Meeting action read:

***"VOTED by a declared two-thirds to appropriate a sum of \$500,000 from CPA Funds for the purposes of Open Space, Recreation, and/or Community Housing for the purchase of the Hawthorne property (Map 11B, Parcel 54), and, to meet this appropriation, authorize the Town Treasurer, with the approval of the Select Board, to borrow \$500,000 pursuant to Chapter 44B, Section 11 of the General Laws or any other enabling authority, and issue bonds or notes of the Town therefore, including any and all costs incidental thereto; to authorize the Select Board, the Town Manager and/or other boards or officers to apply for and receive grants and/or other funds and to execute any and all instruments and agreements to effectuate said purchase; and, further, to authorize the Select Board to acquire said property by gift, purchase, or eminent domain and to accept and/or convey restrictions on said property, all in accordance with Chapter 44B and Chapter 184 of the General Laws. Action taken on 5/12/2010."***

The discussion and vote can be viewed online with Amherst Media  
(<http://204.213.244.104/Cablecast/Public/Show.aspx?ChannelID=3&ShowID=5676>)

## **Public Process—Program of Uses & Conceptual Design**

### ***Affordable Housing***

During the public process to help refine the uses of the property under the CPA legislation, there were few comments and suggestions regarding the affordable housing component. Even though many comments were made with regard to preserving the site, they were made within the context of the back farmland and, perhaps implicitly, referencing the preservation of the house and barns. The comments that were directed toward affordable housing recommended preserving the house if possible and limiting the size and number of affordable units on the property so that the streetscape is maintained. Local residents were concerned that if new housing were built, the size, scale and style might not blend with the neighborhood. It was clear that in terms of preservation of the house and barns, the majority of residents were more concerned with preserving the historic form and pattern of the buildings on the site than reusing the existing house for housing.

Representatives from the Committee on Homelessness encouraged the Town to consider housing for the extremely low-income (ELI), with one-bedroom rental units that range in price of \$350-400 per month.

It was also suggested that solar panels be incorporated into the affordable housing since the current slope and southerly direction of the house roof is ideal for photovoltaics. Amherst's Tree Warden and Town staff assessed the property and determined that to maximize the gain from solar panels, many of the existing, healthy trees in the front yard would need to be removed.

### ***Historical Preservation***

LSSE and Town staff recognized early on that the Hawthorne farmhouse and its outbuildings would involve issues of historical preservation. To clarify the nature and extent of its historical value, a preliminary historical evaluation was obtained from Bonnie Parsons, Historic Preservation Planner with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC), and an application under the demolition delay provisions of Amherst's zoning was filed to obtain the review and advice of the Amherst Historical Commission.

Ms. Parson's report indicated that the farmhouse dated from the late 1700s and, while it retained many historic elements, had been extensively altered.

During the demolition delay proceedings, the Historical Commission determined that the farmhouse was most likely constructed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century using scribed rule, post and beam (timber) framing. Although later modifications have resulted in a house with the appearance of a mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century Greek Revival, the original timber framing appears to be intact and is an example of a relatively rare structure in Amherst. The larger, 'New England' barn with a large sliding door on the gabled end is dated to the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was originally a well-built structure with wide cornerboards and quarter-sawn clapboards on a granite foundation. The small 'horse' barn is a contemporary addition to the property,

constructed in the late 1960's as a pole barn using a pre-fabricated truss system, telephone poles and plywood; the Commission voted to allow demolition of this small barn. The Commission determined that the house and 'New England' barn were historically significant and that their removal from the property should be delayed to consider alternative solutions.

On [date], the Amherst Historical Commission voted that the farm house and large barn on the property were *significant structures* under Article 13 of the Zoning Bylaw and imposed a 12 month delay on demolition of the buildings. The period of that delay ended on [date].

Although the Historical Commission determined the house and barn to be historically significant, historic preservation was not pursued by the Town as a primary community preservation purpose for this property. As the Historical Commission had noted, in the context of all of the historic properties in Amherst that would be priorities for CPA-funded acquisition and preservation, the Hawthorne house is not nearly as important as many others in the community. That does not mean that the Town cannot include historic preservation as an important element of how affordable housing is developed on the property.

As part of the due diligence during the demolition delay, the Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee and the Historical Commission co-sponsored a request for \$20,000 in FY2012 Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds to conduct a feasibility study of the Hawthorne farmhouse and barn. This proposal was approved by the 2011 Annual Spring Town Meeting. The analysis and structural study of the house and large barn will help determine their future: whether the existing structures can be renovated into affordable housing or, if not, whether existing historic structural timbers and architectural elements (doors, molding, etc.) could be adaptively reused in new construction. The study will also provide cost estimates of rehabilitating and converting the structure into affordable housing, as well as cost estimates of demolition and building new affordable housing on the site. The comparative analysis provided by the study is a necessary first step to determine how affordable housing will be constructed on site. It is expected that the study will commence in the spring of 2012. The committee acknowledges that, until this study is completed, its recommendations are preliminary and may be need to be modified.

### ***Recreation***

Disseminating information and gathering public opinion was essential to the recreation public process. On Saturday, November 6, 2010 from 9:00 – 11:00 a.m. the Hawthorne Property Site Visit was held and Town staff provided guided tours of the property including the land, house and barns. LSSE Commission Chair, Stanley Ziomek made introductory remarks and provided background information. Town staff collected comments and questions from community members with a plan to provide answers at an upcoming public meeting. An e-mail distribution list of 59 names was started and used to notify participants of future meetings.

A large joint public meeting of the LSSE Commission and the Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee was held on Thursday, December 9, 2010 at 7:00 p.m. at the Bangs Community Center. Town staff and Committee members recapped the acquisition steps and described ways the property could support affordable housing, open space and recreational needs. Answers to the site visit questions were given in a handout. A photo gallery of property and conceptual plans was on display. The conceptual plan gave approximation of where uses could be located on the property and served as a starting point for the discussion. The public generated additional questions and comments in support and opposition to proposed uses.

An additional large joint public meeting of the LSSE Commission and the Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee took place on Wednesday, March 23 at the Bangs Community Center at 7:00 p.m. The meeting was led by Select Board member and LSSE Commission liaison, Alisa Brewer. The format of the meeting included clarifying questions and answers from previous public meetings and discussing the conceptual plan to identify more specific concerns and questions. Four major discussion themes were outlined including: Parking and Access, Minimizing Impact to Surrounding Neighborhoods, Site and Field Design Considerations and Miscellaneous and New Information. Committee members wrote the public's comments down on large newsprint boards to review again later. The public was invited to visit the new Hawthorne Meadow Public Process webpage at <http://amherstma.gov/hawthorne>.

At the 12/9/10 public meeting 28 residents commented and at the 3/23/11 meeting 17 residents commented, however not all who attended the meetings commented. Both meetings were covered by the press. The issues routinely appeared on the LSSE Commission agenda meetings and in the LSSE director's report since July 2010. The meetings were open to the public and the minutes are available on the town's website. The topic has also been on the agenda for the Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee and the CPA Committee and these meetings are open to the public and minutes are available on the town's website

## Vision

In the Open Space and Recreation Plan and the Master Plan, the LSSE Commission is charged with considering the need of future generation's for playing fields and other recreational opportunities. In considering potential parcels for park and recreation land acquisition the following criteria were used:

- Locate parcels that allow for joint open space, conservation and active recreation usage. Current examples of this include Mill River Recreation Area, Kiwanis Park and Groff Park all of which abut conservation land. Proximity is ideal in order to provide both passive and active recreation experiences.
- Locate parcels near schools in order to allow a significant after-school population to access the area by walking and to share amenities such as parking, restrooms, storage and

equipment. Facilities in close proximity to schools would allow for continued joint Town/School usage.

- Locate parcels near village centers and other densely populated areas which are underserved, lacking sufficient park and recreation resources.
- Develop parcels that can be easily accessed via public transportation, bike paths and walking.
- Develop parcels that are near existing parks and recreation areas so they may share amenities such as parking restrooms, storage, equipment and access to water.
- Locate parcels near schools or existing parks and recreation areas to save transportation time and energy costs for parks and field maintenance crews.

The Hawthorne property fills most of these criteria and a recreational facility in this location would make a valuable contribution to the Town's inventory of active recreation land.

## Master Plan

The purchase of the Hawthorne Property implements the community goals and objectives contained in the Amherst Master Plan. The guiding policy for open space and recreation in the Town of Amherst could be summarized as providing accessible, well-maintained recreational facilities that meet the changing needs of the community. The desire by citizens to create additional new recreational facilities to improve the quality of life in the community is a recurring theme.

See **Appendix B** for a list of goals and objectives that can be accomplished by developing affordable housing, active recreation, and open space activities on the Hawthorne Property

## Open Space and Recreation Plan

Amherst has outlined a plan for addressing its recreational needs and related goals are embedded in the 2009 Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP). The Open Space and Recreation Plan is incorporated by reference into the Amherst Master Plan, and is a more detailed extension of community goals with respect to open space and recreation. According to Amherst's OSRP:

One of the eight overarching goals of the Town is: (#3) *To provide and develop multi-use and multi-generational recreational opportunities that bring townspeople together.*

Another goal stipulates: (#7) *Increase land area available for active recreation in Amherst.*

The Hawthorne property would help accomplish these goals and meet objectives and action steps within the OSRP such as:

- Make use of Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds for conservation and recreation in a way that complements the other CPA goals of historical preservation and provision of low-income housing.

- Develop recreational areas that integrate active and passive recreational opportunities available to all ages and abilities.
- Establish recreational opportunities near population centers such as existing neighborhoods and the Town Center.
- Add new multipurpose playing fields. Based upon the patterns of overuse of existing fields and facilities, LSSE estimates the Town could use ten (10) more playing fields (up to 50 acres), especially for middle and high school aged students, in various locations throughout town to compensate for loss of fields traditionally open to the community at the college campuses.
- Focus the development of new facilities on activities that are underserved by the current limitations of the Town's existing recreational assets, e.g. multi-use active recreational fields.
- Reduce reliance on cars and improve walkability in the Town Center and outlying village centers.
- Create new and improve existing outdoor recreational facilities including (1) non-consumptive passive; (2) consumptive traditional; and (3) active-pool swimming, team sports, and other activities that require built activities.
- Develop neighborhood parks, full recreational facilities and other uses based on local demand.
- Link new facilities to school complexes and existing recreational fields.
- Increase number of multi-use fields and facilities to accommodate simultaneous activities.

## Recommendations

### Conceptual Plan

The Conceptual Plan for Hawthorne Meadow (see Appendix A) was developed as a series of iterations that changed as more information—wetlands, topography, public input, dimensional requirements of playing fields, demand for active recreation land—became apparent. The current draft Conceptual Plan attempts to balance the various uses considered important by residents and the LSSE Commission. It includes:

- A regulation-sized, multi-purpose playing field
- Tables and areas for picnicking
- Community gardens
- Walkways connecting adjacent neighborhoods
- An accessible walkway and sitting area, and
- Un-programmed, flexible open space.

Since a significant portion of the property is considered a wetland resource area, the plan shows a 'Wooded wetland and Wildlife Corridor' that will not be mown or maintained, but instead will fill over time with maturing trees and vegetation that provides East Pleasant Street residents a buffer from the active recreation area.

## Affordable Housing

The former Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee strongly supported affordable family housing on the property. The site's location in the Town Center and its proximity to the schools, parks, public transportation and other services make it an ideal location for housing, in particular, affordable housing. The committee did not consider the development of affordable housing on the entire seven-acre site because that possibility was not included during the CPA process or the Town Meeting vote. While the committee did not determine the exact number of units and type of housing most appropriate for the property, it strongly recommended that the affordable housing be compatible with the neighborhood character, and include every effort to rehabilitate the existing structures.

The Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee therefore makes the following recommendations with regard to affordable housing on 235 East Pleasant Street:

- If financially feasible, rehabilitate the house into two affordable units. If the study concludes that rehabilitation is not feasible, it is preferable that the new structure keep the same footprint and be architecturally similar to the existing house, and that exterior treatment of the siding, windows, roof and other architectural features harmonize with the streetscape and neighborhood.
- If new construction:
  - Re-use and integrate historic timbers into the house to the extent feasible.
  - The height of the new house should conform to the relative height of existing houses on the street.
  - The new house should retain the same footprint, mass and scale of the existing structure.
- The Committee's preference would be for the house to accommodate two families in a duplex and the large 'New England' barn to be converted to an affordable housing unit. If the barn cannot be converted to housing, its next best use, if feasible, would be for storage.
- The small barn associated with the horse paddock should be re-purposed to provide storage for the affordable units.
- The committee would prefer that the affordable housing be rental units.
- Residents of the affordable units should have access to the back of the property through a walking path.
- A walking/foot path connecting East Pleasant Street to the back of the property should run along the southern boundary of the affordable house lot. This path and associated access easement would not allow vehicular access from East Pleasant Street, and would be wide enough only for pedestrians and screening (plantings and

fence); between 5-10 feet ten in width. The affordable housing would be protected physically and visually from the path with evergreen plantings at least six feet in height when planted and with a low, unobtrusive wire fence to prevent dogs and people from entering onto the property. The Town would maintain the fence and plantings in the easement.

- Gardens for the residents should be located on the affordable house lot, and if this is not possible, the residents have priority for community gardens on the back of the property.
- A small, permanent commemorative marker should be placed at the beginning of the foot path along East Pleasant Street that describes the history of the property as a farm and its significance within the community. An additional plaque or commemorative/interpretive area describing the history of the property should also be located on the back of the property in the recreation area.

The Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee emphasized that, within the context of Fair Housing, it is important that design and management of the recreational use on the east side of the property should minimize impacts on the affordable units and the surrounding neighborhood. The committee offered general recommendations for the back property, especially if those uses would impact residents of the affordable units. There were, however, divergent opinions within the committee regarding the specific recommendations for recreational use on the site—some members favored active recreation while others supported passive activities—which is reflective of the broader community as expressed during the public process.

The committee did agree that the future use(s) of the property should minimize impacts and disturbances to the neighborhood by incorporating the following into the program of uses for the property:

- The site should be for daytime use only; there should not be any extensive lights for night activities.
- The Town should regularly maintain and manage the property, including frequent trash pickup and monitoring of parking/drop-off.
- The Town should use the best management practices available with respect to maintaining vegetation on the property—this includes organic fertilizers and integrated pest management. The University of Massachusetts is a local resource that should be consulted from time to time to keep abreast of new techniques and methods.

## **Recreation**

The LSSE Commission recommends the following:



- The Commission supports the efforts of the former Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee to create affordable housing on property that is adjacent to E. Pleasant Street
- The Commission would like to pursue an engineering plan to determine the feasibility of a multi-purpose playing field. This would be a rectangular field for various sports, but would not be suitable for a baseball or softball diamond. The following should be aspects of the proposed field:
  - No lights for night-time activities on the playing field (house may have exterior safety lighting)
  - Limit access from Cottage Street to pedestrian and maintenance/emergency access only
  - Limit access to the old farm road for vehicular traffic to protect wetlands
  - Include a historic plaque and interpretative sign/area in the final design of the property that acknowledges the importance of farming to the Town's history, and includes a description of the history of the Hawthorne farm.
  - Consider access away from childcare center nearby to reduce impact to center.
  - Use of non-toxic (preferably organic) fertilizer on land due to proximity to wetlands and concern raised by neighbors of potential runoff to neighboring properties.
  - Include ADA Access – be careful of current location shown on conceptual plan as attendee at Public meeting stated there may be a culvert there.
    - i. Consider a Z ramp or walkway for entry that would comply with ADA and improve access for all.
  - Protect wetlands during construction, maintenance and use of future field
  - Plan for emergency vehicle access to the field
  - Plan for mowing and other routine access to the field so that it minimizes impacts on neighboring properties
  - Plan for trash collection and removal at property
  - Plan for access to sanitation facilities at property
  - Consider fencing along portions of playing field to keep people and balls from entering restricted wetland areas and neighboring properties, to keep balls from rolling down long.
  - Consider signage, fencing or other natural barrier to deter people being dropped off at Cottage Street to access field.
- The Commission would like to include Community Garden Space as roughly outlined in the conceptual plan.
  - Consider access to water and compost space for gardens
  - Include new gardens on town inventory of free or low cost community plots available to town residents.
- The Commission would like to include walking trails as roughly outlined in conceptual plan.

### ***Site and Field Design***

One regulation-sized, multi-purpose playing field could fit on the property on the open field closest to the Wildwood Elementary and the Amherst Regional Middle School. This multi-purpose playing field could be used for ultimate, football, soccer, lacrosse, rugby, cricket, field hockey and other non-diamond sports, depending on the need. The local elementary school, as well as the Regional Middle School and High School would also use this field. A field that would comprise a regulation size of approximately 175' x 320' is envisioned.

### ***Passive/Informal Recreation***

Within the Hawthorne property passive and informal recreation opportunities could also be available. Picnicking, kite flying, walking, bird watching, dog walking and more could occur on many areas of this site.

### ***Access***

This key 6.76 acre parcel was valued as a high priority by the LSSE Commission because 3 out of 5 children attending a public school could walk to this location for recreational programs. Families would need no transportation to get to this property when activities occurred right after school. The land is located on three PVTa bus routes and within walking or biking distance of well populated neighborhoods such as Village Park, the proposed Olympia Oaks development and the Town Center. Development would be significantly less costly because the Wildwood School parking lot adjacent to the property could serve as a parking area during nonschool hours. Park maintenance for this site will be convenient, require less travel time and therefore be less costly. The Parks crew already travels to the Middle School and Wildwood School on a regular basis to mow the grass and to prepare playing fields. A recreation field on the Hawthorne property would be immediately adjacent and would require no additional travel.

Vehicular access is available via Strong Street, through the Wildwood Elementary School driveway and parking lot. Pedestrian access is available via sidewalks from Strong Street and from the Wildwood Elementary School driveway.

Pedestrian access is also available via a sidewalk along the west side of East Pleasant Street and a crosswalk at East Pleasant and Strong Streets; there is currently no sidewalk on the east side of Pleasant Street. Pedestrian access is potentially available from the Amherst Regional Middle School and Amherst Regional High School if a pathway were to be built into the slope to the west of the tennis courts. Pedestrian access is currently available from the Middle and High Schools via a sidewalk along the south side of Chestnut Street, a crosswalk across East Pleasant Street and the sidewalk that runs along the west side of East Pleasant Street up to the crosswalk at Strong Street.

ADA Access could be provided via routes described above; the proposed ramped pathway from the Middle School to the site should be graded at no more than 5% or 8% with

handrails and level landing areas every 30 feet; handicapped parking spaces should be provided.

### ***Need/Demand***

When considering the vision for the Hawthorne Property, the LSSE Commission is guided by today's compelling needs, the promising opportunities for the future and important lessons of the past. The LSSE Commission has long been concerned about the slow growth of Amherst's active recreation land. Since the last purchase of land almost four decades ago, much has changed in Amherst and around the country specifically, new laws, trends and societal beliefs and practices. On a local level these changes have impacted our youth and adult activity choices, the way we plan recreation programs and concerns about our health.

- *An increase in organized youth sports including soccer and ultimate*  
In the United States during the 1970's, the era of our last major active recreation land purchase, relatively few children and adults were playing soccer and ultimate. The growth and popularity of these sports grew rapidly in the 1990's and is ongoing. In Amherst today, organized youth and adult soccer, lacrosse, and ultimate programs are well established and stand alongside baseball, basketball and football programs, whose popularity began earlier and has endured since the 1970's and before.
- *Interest in recreation and youth sports at a younger age*  
It is unclear exactly when families began to look for sports programs that would captivate the interests of children 4 and 5 years old and younger, but the trend has solid footing today. This practice is not unique to Amherst, but many families and leagues have adopted this option resulting in additional pressure for playing field facilities.
- *Emergence of single family households and dual income households*  
In the 1970's single family households were less common and in dual family households the phenomena of both parents working was also far less prevalent than today. Given these new developments, and with fewer parents home after school, the emergence of after-school programs and sports grew stronger and contributed to a greater use of recreation facilities.
- *Interest in wellness and fitness among adults and seniors*
- *A rise in child hood and adult obesity*  
Two other notable but divergent changes have marked the last thirty to forty years including an interest in health and wellness among adults and seniors and a rise in childhood and adult obesity.

The fitness craze that peaked in the 1980's helped to bring seniors and adults onto the playing fields in Amherst. For instance, varying ability level leagues in softball were

requested and formed. Amherst umpired and less structured “un-umpired,” coed and men’s softball programs, waxed and waned.

Unfortunately, the more long-standing trend is toward an increase in obesity and affects Amherst and thousands of communities. On a national level the World Health Organization and the Center for Disease control report:

- the childhood obesity level has tripled since the 1960’s
  - nearly 90% of overweight or obese adolescents will become obese adults
  - the best way of avoiding obesity is to become active in childhood and then maintain an active lifestyle
- *Passage of Title IX and advancement of youth sports for girls*  
In 1975 President Ford issued the final regulations of the 1972 Title IX law whose passage required gender equity for boys and girls in every educational program receiving federal funding. A publication of the United States Department of Education entitled “Title IX and 25 Years of Progress” reported that less than 300,000 high school girls played interscholastic sports in 1971 but by 1997 this number increased to 2.4 million. Amherst was among the communities throughout the Commonwealth and the United States that experienced a significant rise in girls’ sports programs.
  - *Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, ADA*  
The Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law in 1990 prohibiting discrimination based on disability. This landmark legislation opened opportunities for integrated recreation programming and mandated accessible facility renovations.

## **Amherst’s Recreation Lands - Current Status**

These trends and changes steadily increased pressure on existing resources in Amherst, but the development of active recreation land stalled. As outlined in the most recent update of the Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Town has 126 acres of land designated as Town Recreation Areas. However, it must be noted that 66 of those 126 acres are part of the Cherry Hill Golf Course, a nine-hole municipal course. This reduces the amount of land available for active recreation to 60 acres. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Amherst’s population stands at 37,819. According to national standards, active recreation land should be 234 acres for a population of this size. Even if the area of the Cherry Hill Golf Course is included, Amherst’s inventory of active recreation land needs an additional 97 acres to meet the national standards.

It is widely recognized that the Amherst School Department, with its variety of varsity sports programs, also struggles with a lack of playing fields. While the Town and School collaboratively use the land resources they have, neither can go through a playing season without sharing fields. While joint use of fields is viewed as a wise use of resources, it becomes a problem when fields are used so persistently that they have too little ‘down time’ for high traffic areas to rest, recover, and be restored as necessary. Fields that are overused

begin to deteriorate, become more costly to maintain, and are more difficult to keep in a condition that is safe for users.

Amherst has been fortunate over the years to have benefitted from having access to playing fields on the three college campuses to help meet the community's need for playing fields. In more recent times, however, the college and university inventory for informal playing fields has been significantly reduced with the construction of new buildings, new parking lots, and new varsity team facilities. Amherst's youth sports programs have been critically affected by these changes and attempts to enter into long-term agreements to lease the land have not been successful.

These concerns led the LSSE Commission to actively seek new recreation areas in Town.

## **Open Space**

- Community Garden space, including access for adjacent school use
- Replication of trees lost to field development on a 3:1 ratio as part of a comprehensive site landscape design
- Public walking trails, including a pedestrian access trail to and from East Pleasant Street.
- Protection of the 40% of the site covered by wetlands, as it succeeds over time into a wooded wetland environment and wildlife corridor.
- Use of the succeeding wetlands as an educational opportunity for the schools.

### ***Community Gardens***

Throughout the public process citizens, committee members and staff have expressed strong support for creating community gardens on the site. The Conceptual Plan identifies the most logical location for the gardens in the northeast corner of the site. This location will allow easy access for the public and school children from Wildwood and is adjacent to the proposed parking.

### ***Walking Trails***

The site has a long history of providing walking/hiking opportunities for residents of Strong Street and the surrounding neighborhoods. That history is honored in the new plan for the property as trails are envisioned to connect with the schools as well as East Pleasant, Strong and Cottage Streets. It is unlikely that these trails will fully meet ADA requirements rather they will be much like other trails in Amherst built with minimal tree clearing and wood chips.

### ***Seating and Tables***

Plans for the site should include areas for sitting and picnicking. Families watching a game or others visiting the site should be provided with places to sit and linger with family and friends. These sites should take advantage of both the views to the east and opportunities for shade where possible. No formal barbecue areas are planned.

### **Neighborhood Protections**

- Successional growth of wet woodlands as a buffer for sight and sound of daytime playing field activity
- Security lighting only—no night-time use or lighting.
- Traffic and principal accessible pedestrian and maintenance/emergency vehicle access from the Wildwood School drive via Strong Street.
- All associated parking in the Wildwood School lots. No parking allowed on Cottage Street or East Pleasant Street.
- Access to the field from the north end of Cottage Street for pedestrians and maintenance vehicles only
- Pedestrian paths kept out of residential areas.

## **Next Steps**

### **Affordable Housing Feasibility Study**

### **Wetlands Delineation and Assessment**

### **Schematic Plans of Recreation Property**